

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: River Oaks Community Shopping Center and River Oaks Theatre

AGENDA ITEM: III.b

OWNER: Weingarten Realty

HPO FILE No.: 07L183

APPLICANT: Houston Historical and Archaeological Commission

DATE ACCEPTED: 05-23-07

LOCATION: 1952-2050 W. Gray, including 2009 W. Gray (Theatre)

HAHC HEARING DATE: 06-13-07

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: 05-09-07

PC HEARING DATE: 06-21-07

SITE INFORMATION

Tracts 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13A, 16 and 17, Abstract 696, O. Smith Survey, Houston, Harris County, Texas. The buildings on the site include a movie theatre and several one- and two-story, stucco-clad commercial buildings.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

The River Oaks Community Shopping Center, one of Houston's most innovative and well-recognized early retail complexes, was determined by the Texas Historical Commission on September 5, 2006 as eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. On April 25, 2007 the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission (HAHC) instructed the Planning Official to prepare a Landmark Designation application for the River Oaks Community Shopping Center and River Oaks Theatre to be considered at the HAHC public hearing on June 13, 2007.

Richard Longstreth, the foremost historian of 20th century American retail architecture, considers the River Oaks Community Shopping Center to be "one of the outstanding examples of shopping center design of the 1930s in a national context." Stephen Fox, Rice University professor and architectural historian, contends that the Center has significance for listing in the National Register of Historic Places at the national level, and would be a good candidate for designation as a National Historic Landmark. Furthermore, Fox says it ranks with the downtown Foley's store and The Galleria as one of the three most architectural-historically significant works of 20th century retail architecture in Houston.

The River Oaks Community Shopping Center was constructed between 1936 and 1937 by the River Oaks Corporation from a design by Stayton Nunn-Milton G. McGinty, architects, with Oliver C. Winston as consulting architect. The construction of the River Oaks Community Shopping Center was an important part of the implementation of the overall River Oaks master plan. It provided convenience and commerce for not only the River Oaks neighborhood, but eventually for all Houstonians.

The original center at W. Gray and S. Shepherd consists of two, identical crescent-shaped, one-story masonry, stucco-clad commercial blocks, one on the north side and another on the south side of W. Gray. Each of the two commercial blocks terminates into a two-story, commercial block on the eastern edges, again, one located on the north side and another located on the side south side of W. Gray. This symmetrical placement of these two crescent shaped buildings is what one first sees when leaving the upscale, River Oaks neighborhood on W. Gray, or turning onto W. Gray from S. Shepherd. The center was designed to allow drivers to see all storefronts in either half of the center. The exceptional design and quality of the development was the subject of an extensive article in *Architectural Record* in June 1940. Another innovative approach for the center was the

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

introduction by the architects of a backlit, cavetto canopy to Houston. Another first for Houston was that all buildings were unified by restrictions on signs, displays, and lighting.

The buildings are not only significant examples of modern, Art Deco architecture, but are also closely linked to the importance and prominence of the River Oaks Corporation and its innovative development, River Oaks. Moreover, the Center is significant as Houston's first auto-centered, suburban shopping center, and one of the first such developments in the country. The original two buildings were eventually incorporated into a larger complex covering approximately eight blocks, which expanded the shopping complex eastward toward downtown Houston.

The River Oaks Theatre was built and operated by Interstate Theatre Corporation, which owned a number of theaters in the South. Interstate Theatres hired the Dallas-based architectural firm of Pettigrew and Worley to design the theater, which was designed in the Modernistic style so prevalent in America at the time and in harmony with the balance of the River Oaks Community Shopping Center. The theater building is notable for its sleek modern exterior with bold horizontal lines of alternating black and white bands of enameled steel, a motif which is repeated throughout the complex. A boomerang shaped marquee is affixed horizontally below the black and white banding and is capped by neon letters which spell "River Oaks." The theater remains unique even today as the only historic Houston movie theater still used for its original purpose.

The center has undergone several sympathetic remodelings in the past that reversed prior unsympathetic alterations. More recently, Weingarten Realty has continued that legacy with the completion of several modern, yet compatible, new construction projects, both on and adjacent to the historic site, including Starbuck's Coffee at 2050 W. Gray, Bank One at 2049 W. Gray, and the Kroger Shopping Center further east. Not only were these modern, auxiliary buildings constructed to harmonize in scale, context and appearance with the historic River Oaks Community Shopping Center, but more importantly, the historic Center was not altered in any way during those projects. In fact, Weingarten's past actions have done nothing but acknowledge the center's original architectural elements as significant, and by respecting the Center's architectural and historical importance, have strived to create a real "sense of place" for the entire shopping area. This special character is rarely found elsewhere in Houston, and is one that should be continued and preserved.

The River Oaks Community Shopping Center and River Oaks Theatre, which have been determined as eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, qualify for City of Houston Landmark Designation under Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

The River Oaks Community Shopping Center located at 1952 to 2050 W. Gray and the River Oaks Theatre at 2009 W. Gray comprise one of Houston's most innovative and well recognized early retail complexes. Designed to provide convenient shopping for the new subdivision of River Oaks, this 'community center' is a fine example of suburban commercial architecture with the attributes of small scale, accessibility by automobile, and dramatic modern architecture.

The original shopping center was constructed by the River Oaks Corporation, which was financed by Will C. Hogg and Mike Hogg, with Hugh Potter acting as its President. The River Oaks Corporation had begun to develop the River Oaks subdivision in 1923. The neighborhood's first building was the summer home for William L. Clayton at 3376 Inwood Drive (City of Houston Landmark), which backed up against the extensive River Oaks Country Club and Golf Course. Clayton, a well respected businessman and civic leader in Houston and in the nation's capitol, set the trend for the high caliber of future residents who would be drawn to the subdivision.

The creation of this type of subdivision was unique for Houston in many respects. The subdivision was laid out at what was then the far western edge of Houston. Prior to 1923, the majority of Houston's residential

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

developments had occurred in a tight girdle around the downtown business district. As the sheer size of Houston increased, the demand for more neighborhoods grew along with it. Beginning in the early 20th century, the development followed a generally westerly and southwesterly expansion. The newer, more fashionable neighborhoods, such as Westmoreland (1902), Avondale (1907), Montrose (1911), Audubon Place (1906), Cherryhurst (1908), Binz, Southmore (1914), and Courtland Place (1906), developed along the Main Street corridor and to the southwest of downtown. River Oaks, however, was situated at the western city limits far away from other developments.

In addition, the developers broke with convention by laying out an organic pattern of roadways which lent a sense of spaciousness to the neighborhood, which was very different from the traditional Houston neighborhoods that followed a more rigid approach to development. These traditional neighborhoods used street grids which carved the land up into predictable square or rectangular blocks. According to the Texas State History Association's Handbook of Texas:

"River Oaks is by Buffalo Bayou and Memorial Park in west central Houston. The residential garden suburb, which comprises 1,100 acres, was developed in the 1920s by Michael Hogg and attorney Hugh Potter, who in 1923 obtained an option to purchase 200 acres surrounding the River Oaks Country Club. In 1924 Hogg organized Country Club Estates to promote the development. The two developers retained Kansas City landscape architects Hare and Hare to provide a master plan that would protect the environmental integrity and natural beauty of the area. They also hired J. C. Nichols, who built one of the first major shopping centers in the United States, to serve as a design consultant. The master plan included homesites, a fifteen-acre campus for River Oaks Elementary School, two shopping centers, and esplanades planted with flowers. It called for underground utility lines, eliminated alleys, allowed only three intersecting streets, provided rigid building codes, and eventually banned all commercial traffic. Deed restrictions and centralized community control assured exclusivity; approval of house designs by a panel of architects and citizens and a purchase price of at least \$7,000 were required. A "gentleman's agreement" excluded blacks, Jews, and other minorities. The first home in the area, built by Will and Sue Clayton, is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Among the other notable houses is Ima Hogg's family home Bayou Bend [City of Houston Landmark], designed by John F. Staub and Birdsall P. Briscoe. In the late 1920s the development lost money, but by the late 1930s developers had invested \$3 million in the project, and the community had begun to influence development patterns downtown. In the 1990s River Oaks was at the geographic center of Houston. The community operated independently for three years, after which it was annexed by the city of Houston."

The creation and implementation of the River Oaks plan went far beyond the layout of the neighborhood itself. The developers also needed to devise a clever way of drawing prospective buyers away from the more traditional neighborhoods located closer to the downtown business district. This was achieved in two ways. The first was to insure that proper roads connected River Oaks with downtown Houston. The second was to bring the amenities to the residents.

Beginning in 1925, work began in earnest on Buffalo Bayou Drive, which would later become Allen Parkway. Buffalo Bayou Drive was designed by the Kansas City architectural landscape firm of Hare and Hare. The thoroughfare, atypical for its time, was built to provide a reliable route by which River Oaks residents could get to their jobs in downtown Houston while simultaneously providing a pleasant driving experience. The street was designed to follow the meanders of nearby Buffalo Bayou and originated at the north entry to the River Oaks neighborhood. The entry was marked by grand entry gates designed by Houston architect John F. Staub in 1926.

The plan for the scenic drive began more than a decade before its implementation with the Arthur Comey Plan for Houston in 1912. The Comey Plan was a progressive and ambitious plan to guide the future of Houston's development, with quality of life issues as a major component. Parts of the Comey plan called for the creation of

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

scenic drives, considerable park space, and linear parks along the city's bayous. Ultimately, only a small proportion of the components of Comey's plan came to fruition. Among these realized elements were the layout of South Main at Hermann Park with its prominent traffic circles, and Allen Parkway Drive with its adjacent linear park space situated between the drive and Buffalo Bayou.

Once the River Oaks Corporation solved the access dilemma, Will Potter and Mike Hogg also needed to find a way to furnish the new residents with the goods and services with which they had become accustomed. In 1935-36, the Corporation embarked on a building campaign on sites adjacent to River Oaks proper, where deed restrictions precluded the construction of commercial or multi-family dwellings. The construction of the River Oaks Community Shopping Center was an important part of the implementation of the overall River Oaks master plan.

The River Oaks Community Shopping Center was constructed at the head of West Gray Boulevard where it enters River Oaks and becomes Inwood Drive. The center was designed to not only provide convenient shopping opportunities to the residents, but also to frame the entry to the new subdivision. The plan of the shopping center consisted of two symmetrically arranged semi-circular wings on either side of West Gray at the westernmost edge of the center at its point of juncture with South Shepherd Drive and the entrance into the neighborhood. A service station located on each corner of the shopping center at Shepherd welcomed drivers to this automobile friendly development. A Texaco Service Station was located on the northeast corner, and a Gulf Service Station was located on the southeast corner. These buildings also conformed to the architectural style of the center.

The River Oaks Corporation hired Stayton Nunn, Milton McGinty, and Oliver Winston to design the center. Work began on the center in 1937, a decade after the initial development of the River Oaks neighborhood. According to the June 1940 *Architectural Record* magazine, the architects for the River Oaks Community Shopping Center had to follow several criteria for its design:

"Establishment of a community shopping center is feasible as soon as there is sufficient population in the surrounding trading area to support a representative group of merchants.... The center should be neighborly in character with the adjoining community, corner locations should be reserved for service stations, which were to be planned without sacrificing maximum visibility for the set-back stores: front parking space and direct delivery access in the rear, were to be provided with large additional parking spaces so disposed that patrons would not hesitate to use them; Form and construction of each shop space were to be adaptable for use either with or without air conditioning; Costs were kept as low as was compatible with reasonably good construction. Appearance of all buildings was to be unified, with restrictions on signs, displays, and lighting."

The first phase of construction of the shopping center included both of the one-story crescent-shaped structures located on the north and south sides of West Gray at Shepherd Drive. The north section originally comprised 2.34 acres of land, and the southern section was 2.15 acres. Land to the east of the symmetrical wings, leading to McDuffie, was as yet re-platted at the time of the first phase.

Subsequent phases of redevelopment were added to the River Oaks Shopping Center in 1939 and again in 1948. The additions occurred on several smaller tracts, which were adjacent to the east side of the original crescent shaped structures, but which had previously been used for different uses unrelated to the River Oaks Community Shopping Center master plan, including an Humble Oil Service Station and a U-Tote-M store. Additions to the complex in 1948 finished out the River Oaks Community Shopping Center on both the north and south sides. Although the additions to the complex occurred in two distinct phases of construction, the overlying Art Deco theme is carried throughout all of them. Furthermore, the newer additions to the complex were constructed in 1948, and are therefore considered historic by the United States Department of the Interior.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

One of the most character-defining elements of the River Oaks Community Shopping Center is the River Oaks Theatre located at 2009 West Gray. The River Oaks Theatre was constructed in 1938-1939 on the southeast side of the center. The building was actually a free standing building, not connected to the original crescent shaped wings facing South Shepherd Drive, when first constructed.

The River Oaks Theatre was built and operated by the Interstate Theatre Corporation, which owned and operated a number of theatres in the South. Interstate Theatres was formed in 1906 by several business partners, including Karl Hoblitzelle (1879-1967), who was an internationally acclaimed early cinematic director, producer, and Oscar winner. Interstate originally operated vaudeville theatres, which were in vogue during the period shortly after the turn of the 20th century until the early 1930s. Vaudeville entertainment was centered around the theatrical stage and provided a wide array of live "talent" acts, like dancers, musicians, and sideshow acts. Vaudeville acts had been extremely popular throughout most of the United States, but struggled in the southern states where popular opinion of vaudeville entertainment was not very favorable. Interstate Theatres worked diligently in the South to establish itself as a reputable and wholesome business, and eventually prevailed in its public relations endeavors and established its brand name as one to be reckoned with. At its height, Interstate owned more than 150 theatres in the South.

As vaudeville acts began to wane in popularity all across the U. S., Interstate Theatres was forced to adapt to the changing trends in entertainment. The company began to feature cinematic works alongside its vaudeville performances. This would eventually give way to full time screenings of cinematic works and the eventual abandonment of the vaudeville acts. Interstate Theatres sold most of its interest to the RKO Pictures in 1930. RKO, which has operated continuously since 1929, produced many of the blockbuster films of the 1930s and 1940s.

Interstate Theatres hired the Dallas-based architectural firm of Pettigrew and Worley to design the River Oaks Theatre. The theatre was designed in the Moderne style so prevalent in America at the time and in harmony with the balance of the River Oaks Community Shopping Center. The building is notable for its sleek modern exterior with bold horizontal lines of alternating black and white bands of enameled steel, a motif which is repeated throughout the complex. A boomerang shaped marquee is affixed horizontally below the black and white banding and is capped by neon letters which spell River Oaks.

The theatre's sleek exterior belies the rich interiors found within the building. The opulent interiors of the River Oaks Theatre were executed in rich displays of high relief plaster scenes painted in a palette of rich tones. The theater was originally configured with one viewing screen, but was later converted to three screens. The theater lobby is separated from the main theater screen which is accessible from the ground floor by pairs of steel doors with round port hole windows. An interior stair with graceful curving banister of brushed aluminum begins near the entry to the theater lobby and extends to the second floor mezzanine level. The two mezzanine level movie screens were carved from the original main theater balcony, but which have not taken away from the grandeur of the main theater on the ground floor.

The River Oaks Theatre opened on November 28, 1939, within one month of the opening of the nearby Alabama Theatre. A flyer for the gala opening of the new River Oaks Theatre stated "*Safe! You can send your children to the new River Oaks with the comforting thought that the building is as safe as the most advanced architectural design, the most rigid engineering standards, the most careful precautions can make it. It's fireproof throughout, with extra added margins of safety in every detail of construction. EVERY SEAT A GOOD SEAT! The latest developments in theatre design have enabled us to provide every patron with a full undistorted view of our screen. Every seat in the house is a good seat – and luxuriously comfortable.*" The theater continues to operate as a theater and is the only historic Houston theater still used for its original purpose.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY:

The River Oaks Community Shopping Center and River Oaks Theatre represent several phases of construction. The earliest phase of construction encompassed the western end of the site at its intersection with West Gray and South Shepherd Drive. This section of the shopping center was constructed circa 1937. It is most recognizable for its symmetrical arrangement of semi-circular wings of one-story store fronts. The symmetrical arrangement is divided by West Gray Avenue, which is a major artery to and from the still fashionable, and now historic, River Oaks neighborhood, where Inwood Drive enters River Oaks.

Further west in the shopping center, located immediately east of the two semi-circular wings, are two-story buildings on both the north and south sides of West Gray. The building on the north side of the shopping center is oriented perpendicular to West Gray. This two-story building, which most recently housed a retail clothing store, is an integral part of the original 1937 portion of the complex. The buildings adjacent to the two-story building on the north side of West Gray are part of the 1948 addition to the center. An 1988 alteration to the 1948 additions, on both the north and south side of the streets, added a clock face at the roofline of the front façade.

Another of the center's architectural highlights is its use of integrated concave stucco-clad canopies throughout. The canopies make clever use of hidden indirect lighting which was a novelty to Houston when first introduced. These canopies are mostly obstructed by canvas awnings which were added to all of the storefronts during one of the subsequent remodelings.

The center has experienced several sympathetic remodeling periods in the past, including one in 1974 (Clovis Heimsath, architect) and another in 1978 (S. I. Morris Associates, architects), both of whom reversed unsympathetic alterations in their restorations. More recently, Weingarten Realty has continued that legacy with the completion of several modern, yet compatible new construction projects, both on and adjacent to the historic site, including Starbuck's Coffee at 2050 W. Gray, Bank One at 2049 W. Gray, and the Kroger Shopping Center further east. Not only were these modern, auxiliary buildings constructed to harmonize in scale, context and appearance with the historic River Oaks Community Shopping Center, but more importantly, the historic Center was not altered in any way during those projects. In fact Weingarten's past actions have done nothing but to acknowledge the center's original architectural elements as significant, and by respecting the Center's architectural and historical importance as originally constructed, have strived to create a real "sense of place" for the entire shopping area.

According to Richard Longstreth, the foremost historian of 20th century American retail architecture, the River Oaks Community Shopping Center is "one of the outstanding examples of shopping center design of the 1930s in a national context." Stephen Fox, Rice University professor and architectural historian, contends that the center has significance for listing in the National Register of Historic Places at the National level, and would be a good candidate for designation as a National Historic Landmark. Fox also concludes that the River Oaks Shopping Center ranks with Highland Park Village in the Dallas suburb of Highland Park as one of the two most architectural-historically significant shopping centers in Texas of the interwar era. It ranks with the downtown Foley's store and The Galleria as one of the three most architectural-historically significant works of 20th century retail architecture in Houston.

Richard Longstreth identifies the River Oaks Shopping Center as one of the outstanding examples of shopping center design of the 1930s in a national context. Longstreth writes in his book, "The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941":

"Through the combined efforts of an enlightened developer and a talented architect, the examples of the Washington [D.C.] centers and the drive-in market were fused in an arresting design that was at once heralded as a showpiece of its city.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

"The River Oaks complex was also touted as a model nationally for nearly a decade. Even after the shopping center began to experience dramatic, fast-paced change after World War II, River Oaks was lauded as a pioneer in the field. [Hugh] Potter [developer of River Oaks and builder of the River Oaks Shopping Center] played a central role in fostering this legacy. In 1940, he joined J. C. Nichols and other colleagues in forming the urban Land Institute, a Washington-based organization devoted to improving the standards of new development.

He served as the group's third president (1943-1944) and in 1950 succeeded Nichols as chairman of its Community Builder's Council, which had become the principal proponent and source of information about shopping centers. In the late 1930s, when the [shopping center] type was still considered an unusual venture of perhaps limited application, and when the drive-in concept was likewise seen as experimental for most purposes other than automobile service, River Oaks offered convincing evidence that such ventures had a sound practical basis. No other example so successfully presented the shopping center concept, crafted in a vocabulary that exuded promise, as a solution that appeared not only realistic but inevitable."

The businesses along the north side of the shopping center between Shepherd and McDuffie have not had their leases renewed and this portion of the center is largely empty at this point. On May 23, 2007, the owner, Weingarten Realty, requested a Certificate of Appropriateness from the HAHC to demolish the historic, crescent-shaped building, including both the one- and two-story portions, located at the northwest corner of W. Gray and S. Shepherd, up to McDuffie Street. Their request was denied unanimously by the HAHC.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD, JUNE 1940.

CITE MAGAZINE, VOLUME 36, WINTER, 1996.

HOUSTON ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY, 1980, VOLUME III.

LONGSTRETH, RICHARD, "THE DRIVE-IN, THE SUPERMARKET, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF COMMERCIAL SPACE IN LOS ANGELES, 1914-1941," MIT PRESS, 1999 (p. 159-161).

SANBORN FIRE INSURANCE COMPANY MAPS, HOUSTON. 1924-1950.

HANDBOOK OF TEXAS, TEXAS STATE HISTORY ASSOCIATION.

The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Thomas McWhorter, Planning and Development Department, and Randy Pace, Historic Preservation Officer, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION:

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.

(a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

S	NA	S - satisfies	D - does not satisfy	NA - not applicable
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STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to the Houston Planning Commission the Landmark Designation of the River Oaks Community Shopping Center at 1952 – 2050 W. Gray, including the River Oaks Theatre at 2009 W. Gray.

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SITE LOCATION MAP
RIVER OAKS COMMUNITY SHOPPING CENTER AND THEATER
1952-2050 W GRAY, INCL 2009 W GRAY
NOT TO SCALE

